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Relationship With and Within the Land at a Preschool - Grade 12 School

A Project Report Presented

by

Ben Brock

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In partial fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Professional Studies
in Leadership for Sustainability

October, 2018

Defense Date: August 23, 2018

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Abstract

This project explored the role that relationship with and within a place can play in fostering environmental and community ethics at Riverstone International School in Boise, Idaho.

Riverstone International School is an organization recognized for its academic achievement and outdoor program, however, recent events and dialogues have indicated that it does not necessarily always outwardly or inwardly embody right environmental or social relationships.

This project focused primarily on two groups, with different, but ultimately convergent objectives: 1) teachers remembering stories associated with the place and, 2) students reimagining what environmental stewardship could look like. Each of these processes provided an opportunity to strengthen individual and collective awareness of responsibility and possibility for growth. Ultimately the process resulted in visible changes to the school campus, deepened relationships, and deepened understanding of individual values, strengths and callings, especially in relation to those voiced and practiced by the school. An additional and related focus of the project was the author's own reflection on, and nurturing of, his personal and leadership practices which ultimately resulted in reframing of personal and professional calling.

Introduction

The aspiration of this project was to more deeply interconnect a community and a place and to explore ways in which place and people can, through the fostering of relationship, thrive in their own unique ways. Through this project I hoped to highlight the ways in which the health of the communities of people at Riverstone International School and the health of the place could be recognized as interconnected, and that without attention to one, the other can not thrive to its fullest capacity. During the course of the project space for connections between people and to the place itself was co-created through a series of emergent activities and conservations, especially on the land itself.

Background and Context

Riverstone International School implements an International Baccalaureate curriculum mandating units that address, among other topics, “Sharing the Planet” and “How the World Works,” and hands out shirts to alumni that claim, “Where you’re from is who you are”. However, when students arrive to school each day, parking lots, lawns and building footprints define their environment. Recently, however, I had begun sensing a swelling of “will and motivation” (Stedman, C., pers com) to rekindle, understand and deepen a connection to both the human and non-human dimensions of the place. Notable were several naturalized, native and edible landscaping habitats, as well as a student-initiated magazine called “*Emergency!*” which showcased writing and art produced by students yearning to express themselves in a forum free from assessment. While these actions, undertaken by small groups of volunteers and students were encouraging, a sense of connectivity, belonging, and responsibility to engage in relationship with a place was effectively partitioned in smaller pockets rather than permeating

the community; I felt that neither the community nor the land upon which it is situated are thriving to their fullest capacity.

Using the cases above as inspiration and as nodes, this project sought potential for relationship to transcend an increasingly hierarchical nature of the school and the structure it imposes on the land as well as the people who live and work there. In particular, place-connection and community-making activities were initiated with the goal of deepening relationships between place and community and drawing from and feeding the unique stories associated with place. In an industrialized and technological era aimed at helping students gain individual security and success, a reorientation towards maintaining relationship with place might indeed be the significant challenge facing institutionalized education. (Mang, 2005)

Goals

Goals of increased awareness of the school community's presence in place and time through the deepening of relationship were three-fold: 1) co-creation of opportunities to draw strength from connection to the place and the stories it holds and to celebrate the resilience inherent in those stories, 2.) increased opportunities to develop awareness of, and potentially attend to, the ways in which the institution (as a whole but also comprised of individuals and subgroups) might be complicit in the perpetuation of domination, oppression and injustice and, 3.) increased appreciation for the role that authentic communication (with room to learn from discomfort and pain as well as joy) can play in fostering the resilience of people, a place and an institution.

There have been efforts to understand its connection to "here" and "now" as Riverstone has charted its course; however, the school's community and educational frameworks have drawn significantly from other organizations (most notably the International Baccalaureate

Programme, but also other schools in the region) rather than attend to conditions, needs, strengths and opportunities associated with the immediate community and environment; it would be difficult to define ways in which the education is place-based. By remembering stories associated with “here”, and attending to related questions of scale, a goal of this project was to formulate and explore a line of questions that might help the school better understand its own priorities as they relate to caring for the human and natural community.

Strategies

The following Theory of Change guided this project:

Through fostering increased awareness of and capacity for self-organization and interdependence in relation to land and story a community of learners can re/discover a sense of belonging and connectivity and generate action for environmental and community stewardship.

Central to Riversone’s stated mission is inspiring “journeys of academic and personal exploration,” and this project’s emphasis on “awareness of and capacity for self-organization” sprung from that mission. Centering the project around the idea of self-organization, and the way in which it calls upon participants to know, attend to, and apply their own strengths and needs, provided an opportunity to bridge to expressed institutional values. To foster awareness and interdependence I invited four teachers to ask questions about how the school community draws strength from place and how it contributes to its resilience. Rather than provide a list of potential outcomes, I attempted to embody a willingness to let deep listening and inquiry, rather than a list of results, reflect and inform motivations as it relates to the re/discovery of connectivity and belonging. With a group of students already self-organized around environmental stewardship,

weekly conversations, from which I would often remove myself, provided an opportunity for students to reconsider their relationship to place and potential. With both groups interactions took place outside as a way to invite stories and questions from the place itself into the fabric of the relationships.

With self-organization central to the project, I also identified myself as a focal point of the project; central to my process was a re-examination and articulation of my own relation to a place. To that end, I developed several personal awareness practices to more deeply attune to internal and external conditions; a regular running practice provided an opportunity for more intuitive relationship to the world; daily observation of birds provided regular connection to external patterns and rhythms. While I intended for my running practice to more intimately connect me with the place that I live, it also stemmed from an increasing awareness that, ultimately, the effects of ongoing and incomplete colonial project (Tuck and Yang, 2012) continue to manifest themselves in the bodies and behaviors of individuals as well as communities. Through my running practice, with a simple focus on breath and body awareness, I would be accountable primarily to myself and my relationship with place. My bird-watching practice served a similar dual purpose; to enhance my capacity for awareness, and to provide an opportunity to reconnect with a childhood sense of curiosity and discovery.

Results

It had been difficult to predict how deepened awareness and relationships would manifest. Having recently experienced significant groundshift in my own experience of the world (specifically as it relates to power, privilege and blind spots associated with colonial, white, heterosexual, male domination), I was reluctant (as a white, heterosexual male) to impose

expectations. I had, however, imagined several visible artifacts or actions such as art informed by, and reflecting, increased awareness, public dialogue, and personal offerings reflecting deepened connections.

Indeed, as it relates to the students' expanded understanding of their own relationship to the environment and community and their motivation to act, several outputs are noteworthy: students organized a "Zero Waste Food Truck Rally" to raise awareness of the importance of, and techniques for, diverting waste away from landfills; several students, looking for ways to increase contact points with natural systems, enhanced a bioswale by adding a log to serve as a bridge through the wetland and increase the complexity of the habitat; through increased participation in the Plant Club, several students ate their first freshly picked vegetables, and a newly planted orchard produced its first cherries (4!); an art class installed stepping stones in the native plant garden stating, among other things that "Nothing in nature is unbeautiful." (See Appendix)

After an initial round of invitations to participate in the project, additional teachers expressed interest in participating and provided insights into their experiences of place. A chance conversation with one teacher highlighted the degree to which 3rd generation Chinese residents in the area continue to field "Where are you from?" questions while 1st generation Italian immigrants do not. Another teacher expressed gratitude at having recently changed her last name through marriage (her family, with name associations to many landmarks in the area, had recently sold significant amounts of land to developers, and she was relieved to not be so easily associated with the history and current land use debates). Another teacher expressed interest in involving students in art projects depicting views of the valley prior to human presence.

However, the coalescence of these teachers, even those at the core of the project, into a community where place and story could be explored collaboratively took place much more slowly than anticipated. Through one-on-one personal connections it became clear that there was significant underlying pain, sadness and frustration relating to how some of the involved teachers experienced, tolerated and resisted oppressive and dominating forces within the school community. A predominant sentiment was that the institution, while it has long celebrated its teachers as individuals, was demanding increased conformity to academic practices at the expense of individual educational gifts and strengths. Furthermore, teachers expressed feeling increasingly isolated, by sheer force of increased workload, rather than interconnected towards collective awareness, support and growth.

Rather than redirect those realities and experiences towards an institutional transformation (in line with the original intentions of the project) it became clear that I was called to simply listen to, and be with, individual teachers as they sought a better understanding of their own gifts and callings. By the end of the school year, rather than having “re/discovered a sense of belonging and connectivity and generated action for environmental and community stewardship,” the significant result was the co-creation of space for deepened relationships and personal awarenesses; of the four teachers who became central to the project, one decided to leave the school, one of them had been offered a position at a different school, and one is continuing to look for opportunities outside of the school.

Regarding my own personal awareness practice, several metrics indicate the time devoted to both awareness and connection to place. Through my trail-running/self-care practice I recently completed a 35 kilometer trail run 15 minutes faster than two years earlier. More notable, however, was my initial estimation that I had improved my time by over an hour because I had

enjoyed it so much more than my previous attempt. Additionally, although not necessarily indicative of the intent, through my bird watching awareness I observed 145 species of birds, 52 of them in my yard; this ranks 66th and 14th, respectively, among eBirders in Idaho. Beyond these numbers, however, lies a more significant “result” of the project; after 16 years as the school’s outdoor program coordinator, and then as the school’s sustainability coordinator for an additional year, I have also decided to part ways with the school.

Evaluation and Key Learnings

During the course of this project it became clear that rather than align with school-community level aspirations, goals and principles, the project provided opportunities for individuals, myself included, to re-frame questions about their own senses of belonging and relating. That conversations, deepened trust, and relationships with several teachers provided opportunities for clarity about whether or not Riverstone was a learning ecosystem in which they could express their own unique potential, and that they (again, myself included) then felt strongly enough to leave the Riverstone community, speaks to the impact of this project, even if these departures were not the intended outcome. Despite the departures of several teachers, a significant result of this project has indeed been the emergence of opportunity for deeper collective connection and experience of place. During the project my own framing of the places and communities to which I belong expanded from “the school” to include and overlap with family, friends, neighborhood, the city of Boise, and beyond. Furthermore, those who felt disconnected, isolated, even dominated at Riverstone have sought opportunities and experiences where community and connection is prioritized. One teacher has transitioned to a community writing project in Idaho’s rural school districts where she is looking forward to doing work

“centered in student agency, social justice, and the global perspectives that free us to see ourselves and each other as part of a shared narrative.” For those teachers that have stayed, appreciation for new (or maybe rekindled) experience of relationship was almost universally expressed: “You’re the only person who stops by just to visit.” “No one else at school is asking these kinds of questions.” “I’d forgotten about that...” As I move on, I am comfortable that the seeds for a larger conversation have been sowed and that relationship (rather than protocol, institutional structure or achievement) has, even for a short period of time, been brought closer to the heart of what can allow individuals to thrive.

As it became increasingly apparent during the course of this project that “results” were taking the shape of more private relationships, I was thankful that an advisor reminded me that my own relationships and practices are the core of this project. In particular, a deeper understanding of, and attunement to, reciprocity and co-creation in relationship has developed. In a wide range of personal and professional relationships I now feel more attentively for when I and others are willing to present and receive (to share) our own vulnerabilities as they are associated with fear and pain, but also joy and fullness. Relationship has become a willingness to offer, receive, and then return story, and I am aware that these relationships are being co-created when the language of “want” and “should” gives way to a more imaginative and emergent process and one in which a healing and growth process is shared. Body awareness (which I have been cultivating through my running practice) is becoming central to sensing when authenticity (especially as it relates to pain/vulnerability/joy/fullness) is present and when I am doing my part to create surface area for reciprocity and co-creation and, ultimately, change and growth.

While I still believe that significant change is possible in the way that Riverstone, as an institution, fosters relationships and resists the influence of ingrained colonized behavior, I have

also come to appreciate that with the time and gifts (and privileges) that I have been granted and am cultivating I am called to engage in a different environment. Coming to this understanding has been as powerfully rewarding as any “official” change at Riverstone could have been. It gives me hope that I am at the beginning of a journey that will continue to involve significant personal and community healing. My own developing ability to listen, perceive, understand and relate to the individuals and places that comprise a community will be the lasting gift of this experience. As I move forward into a future that is significantly less predictable and knowable than when I began the project, a deepened commitment to, and appreciation for, awareness and self-care will serve me and the communities of which I am becoming a more willing participant.

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Appendix



Log placed in native plant garden by students.



First cherries in newly planted edible garden.



Placing stepping stones.



First vegetable harvest.